OBITUARY

DR D.L. SERVENTY (1904-1988)

On 8 August 1988 Western Australia's most influential naturalist, Dominic Louis Serventy, passed away. He was born on 28 March 1904 at Kalgoorlie but spent most of his childhood and youth in the south-eastern outskirts of Perth.

He attended successively the primary schools at Armadale and Gosnells, and he received his secondary education at Perth Boys School in James Street and later Perth Modern School in Subiaco, where he obtained his Leaving Certificate in 1922. As early as 1921 he was writing articles on birds for *The Western Mail*. By this time he was well known to Ludwig Glauert, then Curator of the Western Australian Museum. Glauert encouraged the youthful Serventy in his passion for natural history and impressed upon him the need for carrying a notebook and keeping a natural history diary.

In 1922 he began a correspondence and long friendship with the veteran ornithologist F. Lawson Whitlock. In 1923 he became a reporter with the United Press, and under the pen name 'Miletus' produced a monthly column on natural history in *The Farmer*. This brought him into contact with the leading naturalists of the day, and he began to make plans for a club where kindred spirits could meet and discuss all aspects of natural history. His dreams were realized in July 1924 with the inaugural meeting of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club.

Earlier that year (January 1924) Serventy, another naturalist and Otto Lipfert (preparator at the Western Australian Museum) spent a week at Yanchep. They set off at 6.30 a.m. and arrived at Yanchep over twelve hours later. They had travelled by horse and cart, and the road beyond Wanneroo was just a sand track winding through the bush. Lipfert taught his young companions not only how to capture and prepare specimens but also how to use a camp oven and to live in the field. Then the 'long' trip back — today's naturalists can hardly imagine this period before the paving of roads and widespread use of motor vehicles.

In 1926 Serventy joined the staff of *The West Australian*. As he later explained in his application for a Hackett Bursary, journalism was not his chosen profession. After leaving school he had to earn a living and so could only attend university part-time. In 1928, while still a reporter, Serventy enrolled at the University of Western Australia. In 1930 he graduated B.Sc. with First Class Honours (because of his distinctions in first and second year Geology and Zoology he was allowed to do third year and honours concurrently). His honours thesis was concerned with seasonal rhythms in the benthos and plankton of the Swan River. In 1931 he was awarded an 1851 Science Research Scholarship, enabling him the following year to enroll at Cambridge for his doctorate. Here he continued his work on estuarine biology by studying the invertebrate fauna of some of the East Anglian estuaries close to Cambridge. He was awarded his Ph.D. in 1933.

Figure 3. Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) annual interstate conference at Perth, October 1927. Left to Right: Rear Row — Dr A. Chenery (NSW — Vice President), James Pollard (WA), L. Glauert (WA Museum), Edwin Ashby (SA — Retiring President), Lt. Col. E.A. Le Souef (WA — Vice President), D.L. Serventy (WA — State Secretary), F.R. Bradshaw (WA) and A.S. Le Souef (NSW): Front Row — Mesdames L.A. Stevens (SA) and J.W. Israel (Vic), Miss A.F. Smith (Vic), H.A. Stevens (SA) and F. Lawson Whitlock.

On his return to Perth in 1934 he was appointed assistant lecturer in Zoology at the University of Western Australia. In 1937 he joined the CSIRO's Fisheries Division and immediately went abroad. He visited several fisheries and fisheries research institutions in western Europe and the western United States in preparation for research into mackerel and tuna biology, which was at first carried out at Cronulla near Sydney, and after May 1943 in Perth.

Serventy's interest in seabirds was initially stimulated by Glauert and Whitlock, who searched the beaches (respectively at Cottesloe and Bunbury) for birds cast up by winter storms. He became familiar with seabirds in life during his work in the Fisheries Division, which entailed long voyages at sea in the research vessels *Warreen* and *Stanley Fowler*. He transferred in 1951 to the CSIRO's recently formed Wildlife Survey Section were he worked until his retirement on the biology of the Short-tailed Shearwater, popularly known as the Tasmanian Muttonbird, and as officer-in-charge of the Western Australian laboratory of the Section (later Division).

Many people in Bass Strait depended for their livelihood on the harvesting of young shearwaters for their feathers, oil and carcasses (preserved in aspic). A decline in their numbers was causing the Tasmanian Government some anxiety and they asked the Commonwealth to investigate its causes. This required research into the shearwater's biology, and no one was better equipped than Serventy to carry it out.

The number of young shearwaters reared each year was monitored on several Bass Strait islands by the classical mark-and-return technique. Before the harvesting of young birds Serventy would band at random a good number of chicks throughout each island. Later the islanders would keep tally of the birds taken and return any bands found on them. The inverse of the fraction of birds banded to birds taken multiplied by the catch gave Serventy an estimate of the number of young raised that season.

However most of the work was concentrated on tiny Fisher Island off the south end of Flinders Island, within rowing distance of the town of Lady Barron. A one-roomed hut on Fisher Island served as living quarters and laboratory. Every spring for more than twenty years Serventy visited the island, on which all nesting burrows were numbered and all birds were banded. Long before the widespread use of computers, the data were stored on cards, one for each bird and one for each burrow. Gradually knowledge accrued on fidelity to burrow, fidelity to mate, age at first breeding, weight at various stages of reproduction cycle, the role of each sex in incubation and care of young, longevity and many other aspects of life history. Recoveries of banded birds beyond Tasmania enabled Serventy to map the species' vast migrations.

Overseas Dr Serventy is acclaimed as a student of seabirds. In Australia he is best known for his contributions to Western Australian natural history, both for his own research and for stimulating many other naturalists. Throughout his career these two kinds of activity went hand-in-hand.

Based on his own observations, mainly in the south-eastern outskirts of Perth, in Kings Park, on the Swan River estuary, at Yanchep and on the

islands off Fremantle, augmented by those of other naturalists, notably W.H. Loaring in the Darling Range, E.H. Sedgwick in the Rockingham area, V.N. Serventy and S.R. White on the Shoalwater Bay islands, A.H. Robinson at Coolup and F.L. Whitlock at Bunbury, Serventy published in 1948 his *Birds of the Swan River District*. This was a valuable up-dating of W.B. Alexander's paper of the same title, published 27 years earlier. Although Alexander left the Western Australian Museum soon after Serventy began to visit it, there is no doubt that Alexander's sound methodology made a lasting impression on the young Serventy.

On his retirement from the Indian Army in 1925, H.M. Whittell settled in Western Australia. Despite 21 years difference in age and very different backgrounds, Whittell and Serventy soon began a most fruitful collaboration, which culminated in 1948 with *A Handbook of the Birds of Western Australia*. This is still the only book devoted to the avifauna of an Australian state. It ran through five editions and was as popular outside as within the State. Many eastern Australian naturalists bought the book in 1948, particularly because it showed how to identify shorebirds in the field. Hitherto it was generally believed that most of the migratory shorebirds could only be identified in the hand. Sadly Major Whittell did not see his splendid *Literature of Australian Birds* published; Dr Serventy saw it through the press.

As we have seen, Serventy was the main founder of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club in 1924. He served as its first secretary/treasurer. During the Great Depression the Club entered a period of decline. Soon after World War II, thanks largely to Serventy, his brother Vincent and sister Lucy, the Club was revived (and remains vigorous until this day). In 1947 it began to publish a quarterly journal *The Western Australian Naturalist*, devoted to original work in all fields of natural history. The quality of this journal has always been high, and it has set standards for its interstate counterparts. Dr Serventy was its editor until 1980; he also edited most of the handbooks published by the Club, beginning in 1950 with L. Glauert's *Handbook of the Snakes of Western Australia*.

Dr Serventy was a generous benefactor of the Western Australian Museum. Most of the bird specimens that he and Major Whittell acquired in preparation for their handbook were donated to the Museum, as were hundreds of volumes of bird periodicals, including the *Ibis*, *Auk*, *Condor* and *Ardea*. In 1962 he was appointed Honorary Associate and in 1974 Fellow of the Western Australian Museum.

He served natural history and conservation as president of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, president of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club, chairman of the Standing Committee on Pacific Conservation and member of the Permanent Executive Committee of the International Ornithological Congress. He was elected corresponding fellow of several overseas ornithological unions, including those of America and Germany. He was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion for 1956, the Royal Society of Tasmania Medal for 1970 and the Royal Society of Western Australia Medal for 1979. In the Netherlands in 1972 he was made a Knight of the Order of the Golden Ark.

From the numerous scientific and scholarly notes, papers and books written by Dr Serventy the following selection illustrates the breadth of his interests:

Birds of Pallinup estuary, Western Australia. *Emu* **26**: 64-69 (1926).

A glimpse of the bird-life between Mandurah and Bunbury. *Emu* **30**: 33-38 (1930). *Emu* **36**: 189-196 (1937).

Feeding habits of *Podargus* with remarks on the possible causes of its aberrant habits. *Emu* **36**: 189-196 (1937).

The menace of acclimatisation. *Emu* **36**: 189-196 (1937).

Local migration in the Perth district, Western Australia. *Emu* **37**: 90-94 (1937).

Notes on a trawling cruise in the Great Australia Bight. *J. Proc. R. Soc. West Aust.* **23**: 65-87 (1937).

Birds of the islands off Fremantle, Western Australia. *Emu* **37**: 265-268 (1938).

The relative abundance of birds, illustrated with reference to Kings Park, Perth. *Emu* **37**: 269-273 (1938).

Waders and other aquatic birds on the Swan River estuary, Western Australia. *Emu* **38**: 18-29 (1938).

A guide to the field identification of the waders. *Emu* **38**: 65-76 (1938).

The feeding habits of cormorants in south-western Australia. *Emu* **38**: 293-316 (1938).

The Gould Petrel of Cabbage Tree Island. *Emu* **41**: 1-20 (1941, with K.A. Hindwood).

The races of *Puffinus assimilis* in Australia and New Zealand. *Emu* **43**: 113-125 (1943, with C.A. Fleming).

Deposits of shells transported by birds. *Amer. J. Sci.* **245**: 322-328 (1947, with C. Teichert).

Notes from the Recherche Archipelago, Western Australia. *Emu* **47**: 44-49 (1947).

The birds of the Swan River district, Western Australia. *Emu* **47**: 241-286 (1948).

A Handbook of the Birds of Western Australia (1948, with H.M. Whittell), Paterson Brokensha Pty. Ltd., Perth.

Taxonomic trends in Australian ornithology — with special reference to the work of Gregory Mathews. *Emu* **49**: 257-267 (1950).

The bird islands of the Sahul Shelf, with remarks on the nesting seasons of Western Australian sea-birds. *Emu* **52**: 33-59 (1952).

Movements of pelagic seabirds in the Indo-Pacific region. *Proc. 7th Pacific Sci. Congr.* **4**: 394-407 (1953).

Some speciation problems in Australian birds, with particular reference to the relations between Bassian and Eyrean 'species-pairs'. *Emu* **53**: 131-145 (1953).

The southern invasion of northern birds during 1952. *West. Aust. Nat.* **3**: 177-196 (1953).

The late Major Whittell O.B.E., an appreciation. *Emu* **54**: 61-67 (1954).

The Southern Bluefin Tuna, *Thunnus thynnus maccoyii* (Castelnau), in Australian waters. *Aust. J. Marine & Freshw. Res.* **5**: 1-43 (1956).

The breeding cycle of the Short-tailed Shearwater, *Puffinus tenuirostris* (Temminck), in relation to the transequatorial migration and its environment. *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* **127**: 489-510 (1956, with A.J. Marshall).

Breeding periodicity in Western Australian birds, with an account of unseasonal nestings in 1953 and 1955. *Emu* **57**: 99-126 (1957, with A.J. Marshall).

King's Park as an indigenous park — a natural history appraisal. *West. Aust. Nat.* 6: 25-53 (1957, with A.R. Main).

Ludwig Glauert, museum director and naturalist. *West. Aust. Nat.* 5: 148-165 (1957).

The spread of the Mediterranean Snail on Rottnest Island. *West. Aust. Nat.* 6: 193-196 (1959, with G.M. Storr).

Birds of the south-west Coral Sea. *CSIRO Div. Wildl. Res. Tech. Pap.* No. 3 (1963, with K.A. Hindwood and K. Keith).

The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds (1971, with V. Serventy and J. Warham), A.H. & A.W. Reed, Sydney.

Biology of desert birds. Pp. 287-339. *In: Avian Biology*, Vol. 1 (1971) Academic Press, New York.

Aspects of the population ecology of the Short-tailed Shearwater, *Puffinus tenuirostris*. *Proc. XIII Intern. Orn. Congr.*, 165-190 (1967).

A historical background of ornithology with special reference to Australia. *Emu* 72: 41-50 (1972).

Organization and administration of ornithology. *Emu* 73: 206-209 (1973).

The use of data on the distribution of birds to monitor climatic changes. *Emu* 77: 162-166 (1977).

— G.M. Storr.

Figure 4. D.L. Serventy: walking from Mandurah to Bunbury, January 1929.